

Winter Activities in the 20s and 30s

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

Labor Day is upon us and with its arrival the official holiday season comes to an end. Vacations are over except for an occasional weekend and the relaxed freedom of summer becomes only a cherished memory. Offices revert to the full working day after curtailment of hours, and the normal returns. With all of this comes a note of sadness. Beaching was fun, and so was sailing and mountain climbing. The ability to get out into the clear sunlight and open fresh air was a joy we shall surely miss, as we turn our attention to battening down the hatches for winter's challenges.

The advent of Labor Day today contrasts sharply with the days of the twenties between the wars in Duxbury. It used to be a watershed in the life of the town, calling for a radical readjustment after the return of the "summer people" to their homes. They were returning to schools, to shortened commuting distance to work, to a multitude of activities: theaters, museums, athletic contests in the universities and colleges, and a multitude of involvements they had left behind for the summer rest. The city then was the great magnet of social and cultural life, in sharp contrast to the country, and Boston was the greatest of shining cultural lights in the country with its symphony orchestra, its Lowell Institute and its

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religious shrines. It well exemplified the meaning of "City" -- which in earlier times was synonymous with "civilizing center," from the Latin name "civitas." Cities are in decline, it is said, and Bostonians felt a sting of shame the other day to have their fair city on the list of those most deteriorated. But this is not my story.

People who spent the summer in Duxbury returned to the glory and glamour of the city, and some of them must have asked themselves, "What are the good village folks going to do with all their spare time now that we have gone?" They must have felt sorry to leave the "townies" to their drab and dull winter lives. One man came back in mid-February once with a few friends of Duxbury and drove a high school class to Boston to a luxurious dinner and the theater. I remember it well; we went to the Keith theater. My most vivid recollection of that gala night was the crowds of people and the dirty snow. I had never seen dirty snow before. Other people must have shared his feelings because from early times summer vacationers in Duxbury were of a more permanent and responsible nature. Most came for the summer, some rented for a month but few came for less time unlike Brant Rock, Green Harbor and Ocean Bluff. Duxbury summer residents cared about the town; they organized a society to preserve its particular rural-seashore recreation combination. (The Duxbury Rural and Historical Society celebrates its Centennial next year.) They sponsored exceptional students in beyond-high school education and took a real interest in town affairs.

And Labor Day was the Big Day. On that day or thereabouts Duxbury's population shrank from 5,000 to 1500. (Today it stands at over 14,000 year 'round.) It is not to be surprised that a whole new lifestyle took over. So what did the "all-year-rounders" now do? Where did they spend their working days? Without summer activities, there must have been a great deal of time of their hands!

Obviously those now employed in maintaining summer properties continued at these well-paying jobs. Some others found work on the few farms in town (Bay Farm, Knowles Parker's farm, where the golf club is now located, and our own farm, now a public golf course on North Hill.) Many worked on the roads and highways, especially when the snow fell, and often paid off their tax bills in this way. The Old Colony Railroad, which kept its schedule until its last run on June 24, 1939, employed many townspeople. Laundry routes, milk routes and meat routes continued at a curtailed rate. Businesses continued, with the 2 centers, one at the old Cable House corner (which in its heyday sported Tony Lucas's barber shop, a plumbing shop and First National Store, plus Briggs's livery stables) and the other at what is now called Snug Harbor. The Duxbury Coal and Lumber Company and Sweetser's were dominant here, with Josselyn's Variety Store and a Longfellow-type blacksmith shop right under Clapp's Hill. The Plymouth Cordage in its prime probably employed more Duxbury workers than any other single enterprise. But many found winter jobs in Kingston tack factories and the shoe factories of Whitman, Brockton and the Bridgewater.

These were the wage-earners, but folks living at home in families knew that Labor Day in Duxbury meant work, hard work and lots of it, with few amusements. First of all was the harvesting and canning that really began in late summer. Every home had a plot of ground set aside for a garden to grow staple foods, and these had to be garnered. The potato patch, onion patch and turnip patch all had to yield their fruits, as well as pear and apple orchards, and all went into the "root cellar," a heatless section of the basement.

Insulating the house for winter was a high priority also. This first of all consisted of our placing a wooden frame like a snow fence all around the house foundation to a height of 3 or 4 feet. We then filled it with marsh salt hay or straw. The public landing at the end of Duck Hill Rd., below where Drew's Salt Works is indicated on old town maps, is designated as "access for the harvesting of salt hay." We picked up this straw and hay everywhere on the edges of the marshes. Today people are again finding that some protection of a dwelling placed over the gap between the house sill and foundation (especially true of old

Duxbury houses) has real insulation value.

By far the greatest winter preparation was the procuring and processing of firewood. Many homes had "woodlots" and most everyone had access to one. When the leaves were off we would cut down and stack the firewood in cord or multiple cord piles of 4-foot lengths. This would be hauled out by horse and sledge when the ground had frozen and the first real snow had fallen. These sledges were frequently homemade of heavy oak trees rough-hewn into a platform raised on 2 curved runners, also of oak. The wood was stacked in the open where the sun could have full play on it and left until the following fall, when it would be cut into 18 inch lengths for the cookstove, 24 for the parlor heating stove and 30 for the fireplace or furnace. Oil burners had not yet arrived and some houses, whose owners could afford it, were heated with coal implemented by steam radiators or hot air registers.

One of the winter activities of high school lads was tending these coal furnaces when there was no man in the house. The job also included taking out the ashes and often sifting them onto the driveway and rescuing the unburnt coal for another go in the furnace. I took care of 2 furnaces besides the coal stove in the fire department's #1 engine house before the days of anti-freeze. One was for Mrs. Jackson, who lived next door, and the other was for the G.C. Allen house across from Mattakeset Hall. This latter task had an added touch. Like many homes in Duxbury at the time, the Allen's kept chickens in the backyard, and as is customary in the chicken-raising world, non-egg-producing hens were fit only for the Sunday dinner table. So I was paid 50¢ every Saturday to dispatch a big fat hen to be plucked for roasting. I remember opening the bulkhead and descending the stairs into the semi-darkness where close by on a chopping block, hooded like a murderer awaiting the executioner's ax, stood an innocent hen. My only conscience-salver was the fact that the deed was accomplished by one swift blow and the struggle that took place in a nearby barrel lasted only as long as it took me to empty the ashes.

cupied time and effort. Most Duxbury enterprises that required refrigeration had their own ponds and ice houses as did B.F. Goodrich for his duck farm in West Duxbury. Ice harvesting was a precarious and tricky business; so much depended on the weather about which we had none of the present accurate information. The ice had to be harvested if possible before snow fell, because a layer of frozen slush on top of clear ice on the tailgate of a truck in the summer was a "no-no."

I remember well helping my Uncle Everett, who had a meat business in Kingston, harvest his ice on a little pond just below the "Kingston Sharpening Place" and across from a factory close to Rte. 80. My most vivid recollection was of the warmth of the horse's back as I rode her across the pond pulling an ice plow in the rosy colors of dawn on a zero December day. The ice business flourished well into the late 30s, when electric compressor refrigeration took over. Ice harvesting was a major winter industry in New England, especially on the Kennebec River in Maine, where schooners carried cargoes of ice to the Caribbean and returned with sugar, rum and molasses. Ice harvesting did not involve many, and it was always a short, intensive work experience, but an important one for the town.

An activity that involved many for the sake of a few was furnishing supplies and material to the Gunning stands on the beach and marshes in town and on Clark's Island. This activity ended with the season at New Year's, but involved the attention of many.

Some farmers, including my father, used to harvest kelp from the beach after every big northeast storm. I think I have never been so cold as the day after one of these explosions of nature when my brother Henry and I were sent with a 2-horse wagon over to Brant Rock where tons of kelp had been heaved up by the storm. The temperature was in the 20s and a harsh wind was blowing that drove right into our bone marrow. The coast guard station nearby was a real boon, as it welcomed us to come in and warm ourselves. We then took the kelp home and spread it on the cornfields for the next year's planting.

I suppose the greatest difference between the lifestyle Duxbury's summer folks left behind and the

amusements. Much of these had "uplift" as their goal and purpose, others were satires on townspeople, and some were simply cultural accomplishments, like the plays put on by the high school.

Mr. Seymour, a noted Broadway actor who lived on Washington St. opposite the then Fanny Davenport estate (part of which is now the Milton Heath property) held dances, I suppose, to assist village people in the social graces. I remember being part of a Maypole Dance as an awkward and embarrassed teenager. I always wondered later why my father, who scorned all "unproductive" activity, sent me. Then there were lectures often held at the then Unitarian Parish House, next to the post office and diagonally across from Paul Peterson's drug store. Admiral Perry came to talk with slides of his trip to the North Pole. Dr. Shapley of Harvard gave an astronomy lecture and a Unitarian minister of great eloquence spoke on current events. I remember only one thing about this last: his report of taking a daily early morning cold bath. Early morning cold baths were that period's equivalent of jogging -- it was believed that the character-building involved in leaping out of a warm bed into a tub of cold water was unrivaled. But this man said he took his "cold bath before the stove in his living room," so I tagged him as a phony. My sister Betty had to take a cold bath every day for 7 days straight to qualify for the girl scouts!

Mattakeset Hall was the scene of much uplifting activity and amusement. Here Helen Cushing and Jimmie Ingalls played the accompanying music to the silent movies of the time -- including Charlie Chaplin in "The Immigrant." I remember the portrayal of Evangeline by picture slides while pupils in turn recited all the lines of Longfellow's "Evangeline." But the wildest and most involving performance at Mattakeset Hall was the annual minstrel show.

And as I begin to write these words I am almost overcome with shame and remorse that good, God-fearing and intelligent people like us could stoop to this kind of activity and be so insensitive as not to see what it did to their black brothers and sisters.

tain embarrassing facts about various people in town were gathered and sifted out and then 15 or so men with blackened faces and speaking in a Negro accent and addressing one another with Negro names would proceed to ridicule in a friendly way (and never with malice) different persons in town. The central figure was a white man, called the interlocuter, and it was his function to receive first all the comments and make appropriate responses. This post was held for many years by Paul Peterson. I said there was never any malice, but on rare occasions scandals and gossip that had never been opened up to the public were heard, like secret love affairs.

My father always took a beating as he was in the retail meat business. A black "3rd man" would begin to comment on tough materials he had known, like stone, and steel and hard rubber and end with, "But nothing could compare in toughness with Hort Merry's rump steak."

People were teased for physical attributes like David Goodspeed, who lived on the north corner of Chapel and Washington streets. David was a corpulent individual, with a girth close to 60 inches. He would be reported as hunting for his belt one day and he asked his wife if she had seen it "around the house." "Why David," she replied, "have you put your belt around the house?"

Dr. Spaulding usually came in for a comment. He lived across from the entrance to Long Point Marine on Washington St. A black-faced man would report that he had awakened in the night a few days ago with abdominal cramps, and gone to Dr. Spaulding, who wrote out a prescription for his ailment. When he took this to Paul Peterson, it was found to be for "Allen's Foot-Ease," a contemporary leather softener for use with tight-fitting shoes.

Another town leader seldom missed was T. Waldo Herrick, the Ford agent for Duxbury, who was the butt of many of the current jokes about the Model T Ford. One of them would be the report of a Ford enthusiast's defender of the fact that Ford did not supply speedometers with his cars. "Why do you need a speedometer? What a waste of gadgetry! You can always tell the speed you are driving in a Model T because at 15 miles an hour the front fenders rattle, at 20 the rear ones, at 30 the windshield rattles and at any higher speeds your bones rattle."

One show I remember particularly was one in which the song, "The Wild Man of Borneo," was sung with a new character added every stanza (as in Old MacDonald's Farm), until they seemed to end with the dog and then the hair on the dog and a flea on the hair, climaxed by the line "And Tony Lucas (the local barber above Bluefish River bridge) cut the whiskers on the flea," at which the entire packed room burst into a roar. I look back at those unsophisticated winter days and wonder that we got so much amusement out of such simple things.